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ABSTRACT

Examination of representative stories told by black American children of West African descent in South Carolina shows that specific cultural motifs have been preserved in the oral tradition of black communities. Typical stories are tales of the supernatural, such as the Hag story about mortals who shed their skin at night to do evil deeds. Variations of the story can be found among groups in Nigeria and Liberia, and among blacks in Michigan and different parts of South Carolina. A second type of story deals with human powers and insight, such as the powers believed to exist in persons born with cauls over their faces. Similar stories have been found in Michigan. A third type of story is the narrative of personal experience which, among blacks, involves the active participation of the listeners. This manner of storytelling resembles that found among the Igbo of Nigeria, many of whom were brought to North America as slaves. Stories told by black children differ from those told by whites in that the latter seldom include the listeners; furthermore, blacks use a dialect that is unlike whites' standard English. In theme and storytelling style, black children's stories reflect a background in which children were reared by grandparents and great-grandparents who have exposed the children to the lore, language, and culture of the ancestral homeland. (Author/MJL)

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University of Santa Clara
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AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN'S STORIES

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July 1982

My purpose in discussing several representative stories told by African-American children is to show the continuity of specific cultural motifs which are preserved and kept alive in the oral tradition of their communities. I collected these stories during 1974 and 1975 as part of a linguistic study of the creole Gullah and the language change it is now undergoing in the coastal South Carolina area of the Waccamaw Neck (Nichols 1976). This section of South Carolina is one which has been heavily populated by people of West African descent since the mid-1700's, when slaves were brought from the Windward and Leeward Coasts, the Bight of Biafra, and Angola to work the rice crops which formed the economic base of the new Carolina colony. The Waccamaw Neck between the port of Georgetown and the union of the Pee Dee and Waccamaw rivers was the heart of the rice culture, where the most prosperous plantations flourished between the river and the ocean. (See Figure 1.) Most of the black residents of the area today could trace their ancestry back to an original African immigrant, if the records would permit. The county of Georgetown had a black majority until the 1970 census, when for the first time whites had 51% of the population (Georgetown County, 1972). During the malaria season in slavery-time, when the Europeans who were susceptible to the parasite journeyed inland to summer retreats, blacks often outnumbered whites on

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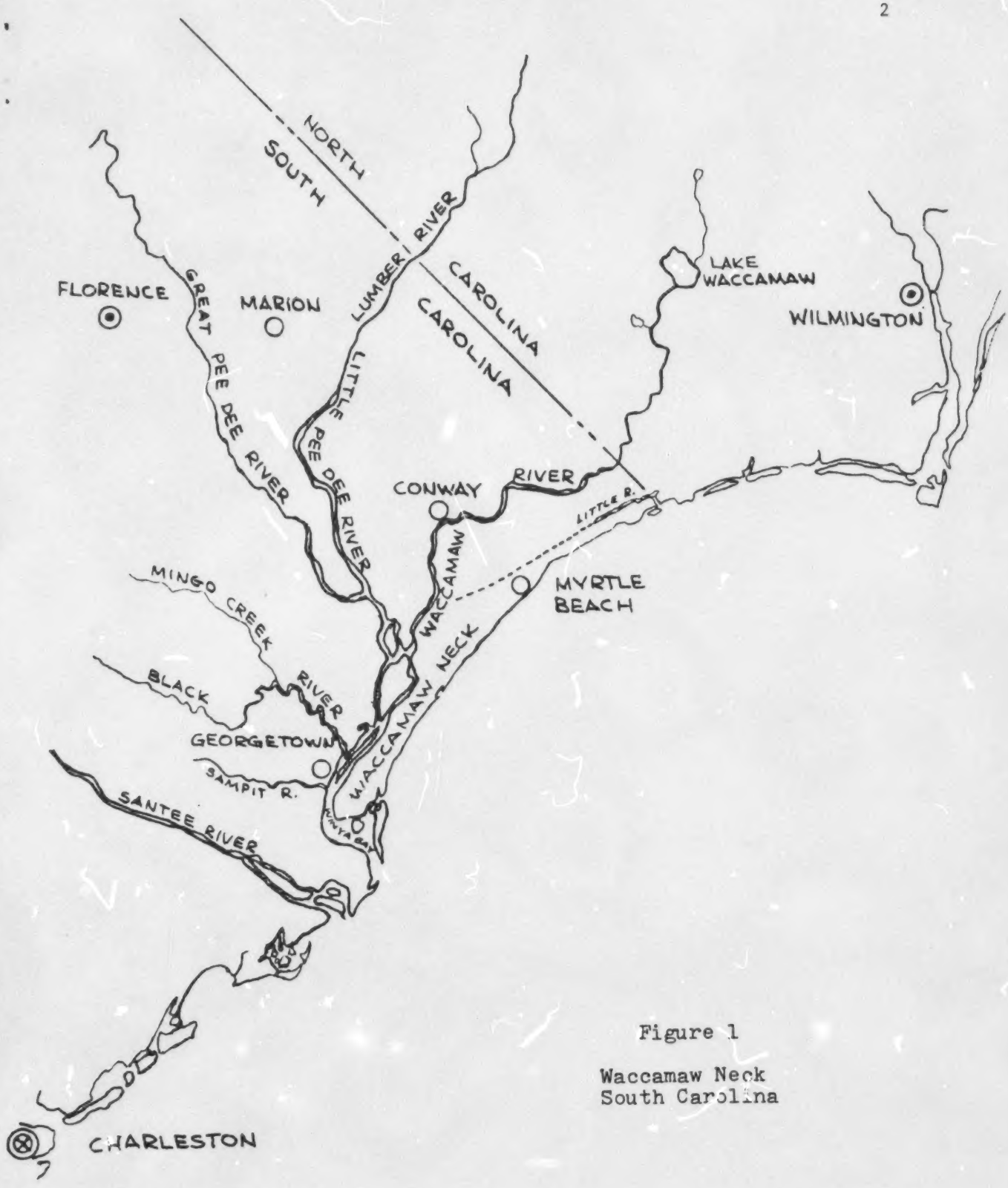

Figure 1

Waccamaw Neck
South Carolina

the Waccamaw Neck by a ratio of 10 to 1 (Wood 1974). The culture which grew up there has had continuity since the original involuntary settlement by Africans in the eighteenth century, and it represents an important resource for the study of African-American traditions and cultural continuity.

It is probably important to stress that these stories discussed here were not sought deliberately, but came as a result of the way I went about my linguistic field work. Before going into the field, I sought advice from sociologist J. Herman Blake who has worked for some years in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, collecting oral history in the region which has been called "one of the most distinctive reservoirs of African-American culture in the United States" (Jackson, Slaughter, and Blake 1974: 32). Blake advised me to have a reason for being in the community, to work for and with the community in some useful way. Anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath offered similar advice from her experience with a Black community in upper South Carolina (Heath, forthcoming), suggesting that I volunteer as a classroom aide in the elementary school attended by the children of the community whose language I wanted to study. It was in the social context of this work as an aide for five months in a fifth grade classroom on the Waccamaw Neck that I collected the stories discussed here. The first stories of the supernatural were collected as part of a classroom ghost-storytelling session at Halloween time. Later individual narrative experiences were recorded in smaller groups of three or four students from first through sixth grades in the same school. Some of the supernatural stories recorded at the earlier session were repeated in these smaller groups. While the initial purpose of these recordings was the study of a portion of the language of the larger community in a Gullah-speaking area, these stories which emerged are valuable in and of themselves as evidence of cultural continuity and vigor. They repeat themes which have been recorded by researchers as far distant as the Upper

Peninsula in Michigan and as far away in time as fifty years ago by story collectors in the same communities on the Waccamaw Neck. They give evidence of preservation of significant cultural traditions even though television and the automobile are integral parts of the contemporary scene within the homes of these children. It is probable that the stories preserve original African themes, but the specific nature of these connections is not always obvious. Although I myself have been able to find some corresponding themes in the West African story collections I have looked at, I offer these stories with the hope that others more knowledgeable about the source languages and cultures might be able to discover further connections. I suspect that the stories, like the language in which they are told, represent adaptations of old themes into requirements and life experiences of the New World. As such, they give us insight into processes of cultural transmission.

I have selected three kinds of stories to discuss here: two of the supernatural, one of special human powers or insight, and two of narrative experiences. All were told by children who were at the fifth-grade level in school, ranging between the ages of 10 and 12.

The first story is a Hag story, common in coastal South Carolina but found also in other parts of the world. The editors of the WPA collection, South Carolina Folk Tales, observe that skin shifting itself is almost a universal motif, citing stories from Tagalogs in the Philippines and also from the Bahamas (p. 89). I have found two stories from southern Nigeria which involve skin shifting; one concerns two men who exchange skins and life roles (Dayrell 1913: 69-71), and the other a woman who has two skins, one ugly and one beautiful (Dayrell 1910: 11-19). Neither of these stories seems to connect directly with the Waccamaw Neck story of a witch who assumes a mortal's shape in the daytime, but sheds its skin in the nighttime to do evil deeds like stealing or "riding" people and animals to the point

of exhaustion. The Vais of Liberia, however, are reported to believe in a kind of witch which has precisely those powers and weaknesses ascribed to the Hag of coastal South Carolina. George W. Ellis (1914: 63) in an early ethnographic work on West Africa describes this Vai belief as follows:

> There is a belief. . .among the Vais that witches come to your house and ride you at night,--that when the witch comes in the door he takes off his skin and lays it aside in the house. It is believed that he returns you to the bed where he found you, and that the witch may be killed by sprinkling salt and pepper in certain portions of the room, which will prevent the witch from putting on his skin. Just before they go to bed it is a common thing to see Vai people sprinkling salt and pepper about the room.

The specifics of this Vai belief are similar enough to those found in the Hag stories of the Waccamaw Neck--and elsewhere in North America where we find cohesive African-American communitites--that it is probably safe to assume a Vai origin for this particular kind of story. There is of course some remote possibility that the belief was brought to Liberia between 1822 and the American Civil War, when freed slaves from the United States settled the new Liberian colony. Its appearance among the Vai early in this century seems to speak for an older tradition in Africa itself, however.

In any event, such stories were found on the Waccamaw Neck early in this century, as well as in recent years, suggesting a long-standing tradition in the African-American community. A Hag story collected by Genevieve Wilcox Chandler during the 1930's for the WPA in this same area of the Waccamaw Neck involves a man who misses his wife about one o'clock each night from their bed (SC Folk Tales: 89). A friend advises him to search for her skin under the staircase while she is gone and to put salt and pepper on it if he finds it. He does so and

hears the returning wife say, "Skin, skin, you know me? Skin, skin, dis me," as she tries unsuccessfully to get back into her skin. Notice the similar words repeated in this child's story of a woman who tries to lead her and two other children into some unspecified danger. This Hag is stymied when one of the children shakes salt onto her skin, and the Hag tries unsuccessfully to get back into the skin.

HAG

One day me and Shewana and Jimmy been walking down the road. We been going carry the trash to the garbage disposal. And then, Mary _____, she been a-going down the road. And then she say, she tell me, Jimmy and Shewana that she want us to come to her house fuh get a package. And then we say no, and then she keep on following us everywhere we go. And then it got dark -- we been walking down Parkersville Road -- then we see she jump out her skin. And then Jimmy gone to _____ and get a box of salt and put the salt down on her skin. And then she come back and say, "Skin, skin, you know me." She keep on sayin, "Skin, skin, you know me." And then we tell our mama, and mama say that what the ghost-dem always say, say when somebody put salt or pepper in their skin, they come back and say, "Skin, skin, you know me."

-told by 5th grade girl

A very similar story was collected by folklorist Richard M. Dorson in Michigan in the 1950's. The storyteller was a black man named James D. Suggs, born in Mississippi in 1887. The witch of his story assumed the form of an older woman named Grandma Jane. Her activities centered around stealing diamonds and jewelry from her neighbors out in the country. One night a man came home late from a party and saw her taking off all her clothes and then her skin. He sprinkled pepper and salt on the skin as she went about her thieving. When she tried to get back into it, the salt burned her so much that she couldn't. Three times he heard her say, "Skin don't you know me?" She bargained with him to wash the skin with soap and water; in return she would replace the stolen goods. Even

though she got her skin back, the salt had taken away all her powers as a witch or hag. She lived out her days as a poor old widowed woman (Dorson 1956: 145-146). Similar stories of witches who shed their skin and can be prevented from returning to it by sprinkling salt and pepper on it have been collected in many African-American communities throughout South Carolina, from the Sea Islands to the central part of the state (Davis 1914; Parsons 1923; Smiley 1919). The theme of witches who ride human beings at night, using their hair as bridles, can be found in North European traditions (Henderson 1866); the skin slipping and salt sprinkling, however, seem to belong to a West African tradition.

The second type of supernatural story is common to coastal South Carolina; it is not widespread, however, and may originate on the Waccamaw Neck with the earliest West Africans working it its swamps. The central figure is a Plat-eye, an evil being which can assume all kinds of animal shapes. Two common features are the struggle between good and evil forces and the fiery eyes which burn in the creature's head. Genevieve Wilcox Chandler collected one from the Georgetown area in the 1930's in which the Plat-eye took the form of a "black cat wid he eye lak balls ob fire, en he hair stan on end" (SC Folk Tales: 88). Her narrator tells of singing a hymn to ward off the evil power of the creature and of running away, praising God for delivering her from that cat. I collected a story without such vivid descriptive detail of the creature itself, but with the same pull between good and evil felt by the child narrator, as he stood on his grandmother's grave in the churchyard for protection from the evil Plat-eye playing the piano in the church. Note the comment by one of his listeners at the end of the tape on how a Plat-eye looks: "Fire come out ee eye!"

PLAT-EYE

To our church, we had a old piano in our church, but now we got nothing. And some Plat-eye -- see, me and Gregg-dem and some more children, we used to go back there. And then one day we gone back there, we hear the thing playing and we went back there, and then -- we see the keys just a-move like this here, and then -- the night come -- I say, "Gregg, look-a-there!" And then been a Plat-eye moving the keys -- the piano keys -- and all that. And then we went by the grave, and then I gone and stand up by my grandmama grave and then they wouldn't come over there. But they stay right there, play that piano.

Teacher: What is a Plat-eye?

[many simultaneous answers] Fire come out ee eye!

-told by 5th grade boy

The origin of the Plat-eye as a motif is far from clear. In his early collection of folklore among blacks in South Carolina, Henry D. Davis observes that the Plat-eye is common to Georgetown County and to Williamsburg County, an adjacent county which shares both a boundary and swampy plantation lands with Georgetown. Davis says that its appearance is often in the form of an animal and it is associated with the new moon (Davis 1914: 248). The Plat-eye is not common in other folktales told by blacks, either in South Carolina or in the rest of the United States. It of course has similarities to the Evil Eye which appears widely in Scottish collections, but the specifics of the fiery eye and the animal shape would seem to distinguish the Plat-eye from this European being.

The third story concerns a common belief in special human powers which come to a child born with a caul or veil over its face. Belief that such a birth is lucky is found in early Anglo tradition (Henderson 1866), but specific belief that a child born with a caul over its face can see ghosts until early manhood is common among African-Americans. The Michigan storyteller cited earlier tells the folklorist that, "When the baby is born with a veil, if it is lifted off over the front of the head, the baby won't be bothered, but if it is lifted off backwards, it will be

bothered until manhood. It see things. That happened with my father and me. Doctors don't believe in nothing like that. I've seen men come [become] like dogs, just the flick of your eyes and you look back and it be something else. About twelve years ago I was going up to Mrs. Cook's and I saw a dog sitting on the bank and I swung at him with an empty bucket and the bucket went right through him -- and the moon was shining just as bright. One thing, they can't harm you" (Dorson 1958: 188). He goes on to tell a story about seeing a ghost dog which is remarkably similar to the one told by this Waccamaw Neck child who had a brother born with "something on ee face."

BORN WITH A CAUL

This about my brother name T. And he was born with -- I don't know, but he was born with something on ee face and he could see ghost when he was little but now he can't. And my mother -- and he the second oldest in the house -- and my mother used to carry him everywhere she go, because he wouldn't let um -- my mother -- go by eeself. Then one night my mother and my brother went to school. And then -- big schoolhouse where Mrs. N teach right in that -- and my brother see -- my brother see a ghost, but my mother couldn't see it. And then my brother tell my mother say he wasn't scared. But my mother say it might hurt you. And then ee tell um "Let's turn back wait till some other people get there." But my brother he ain't paying no attention to Mama and he went right on. And he come back and Mama ask him if he see anything. And ee say he see a white dog -- a white ghost dog. And ee run back there and he say he been gon run behind um but ee been too fast for um. So he turn back and -- I forgot. That's all.

-told by 5th grade boy

The final kind of story is one of personal narrative experience. What seems to set this type of tale, common the world over, apart for black children of the Waccamaw Neck is the cooperative elements of the storytelling itself. The participants of the storytelling session all have active roles in the process, the audience as well as the teller. The listeners often actively contribute endings, solicit further details, or serve as sort of a chorus for the main action, as in the

following hunting story. In this story RW is the primary storyteller and JL, a member of the audience, is also the subject of the story. JL selects the specific topic and contributes an ending showing himself to best advantage.

HUNTING FOR SQUIRREL

RW: Lemme see what I can talk about. You.

JL: Tell um bout that buckshot, shot gun.

RW: Oh Yeah. One day, me and John Lance been going hunting for squirrel, him and my daddy and John Lance, we were going hunting. And John Lance see a squirrel.
John Lance say, "Daddy, let me hold the rifle."
Then ee daddy say, "No, the rifle might kick you. Shoot with your pellet gun."
John Lance say, "No, I'm going to kill the squirrel." Then John Lance say, "I gon shoot my pistol."
And ee say, "O. K., shoot your pistol."
John Lance shoot at the squirrel and brush the squirrel. Then John Lance say, "I'll get him this time." Then John Lance shoot the squirrel in ee tail. Then John Lance say, "The next time I bet you I can get him, Roger."
And so when John Lance shoot, he daddy blow the squirrel out the tree. Boo-ow! John Lance was mad. John Lance say, "No, I going hunting by myself." John Lance gon up in the woods.

JL: Say, "John Lance say, 'Poop he daddy! Daddy can't do nothing for me. I'm 'on get that shotgun and I'm 'on haul boogie boy!'" Say that!

RW: John Lance say, "Poop ee daddy! Gon get that shotgun and haul boogie!"

-told by 5th grade boys

Now contrast these dog stories told by a white and a black child of the same age, socio-economic status, and academic ability.

DOG AND CHICKENS

I have this dog and we have a bunch of chickens back at my uncle's and at my house. And this dog, he went after the chickens the other day, and he killed two roosters and four hens and went after some more. And when he did, my uncle shot him in the leg and made him go on. And

he came back yesterday and almost got some more. We ran him off again. And when we did we had to go take him to town and put him to sleep cause he was real badly hurt. So we had him pretty well fixed up, so we could bury him.

-told by 5th grade boy (white)

DOG AND CAR

Oh, I got one. [Overlapping previous story]
One day, yesterday, me and Darryl, we were going in the yard. Me and Darryl hear a car say, "Bump, bump." And then Teria dog -- and he say, Darryl said, "Teria dog done get hit. " Then me and Darryl run up there and the dog bleed all over. Then Bubba bring um in the yard. Then Bubba gone get ee gun and shoot um.
[Questions] He been dead.

-told by 5th grade boy (black)

Although the two stories have the same topic and were part of the same storytelling session, the rambling detail and background information given in the first story contrasts sharply with the economy of the second. The second tale is a cooperative one -- a joint group effort, rather than one of a single storyteller addressing a passive audience. The audience solicits details of the final outcome.

As speech events, the stories told by fifth-grade black and white children on the Waccamaw Neck differ in ways similar to those described for black and white non-mainstream speech communities in the Piedmont Carolinas (Heath 1982). While both of the dog stories quoted above maintain the kind of chronicity characteristic of personal narratives for children of this age (Sutton-Smith 1981) and both obviously center around a factual event, they contrast in storytelling style. The white child presents material from the point of view of his own place in the narrative, identifying his relationship to the chickens and to the dog killer. The black child gives proper names for his characters, assuming his audience will know them, and seems to perform his narrative more than tell it. He gives direct

conversation and provides sound effects for the car that hit the dog. His story has a specific location in time and space, again indicating reliance on the audience to know exactly where the "yard" is located. The white child provides something of a moralistic comment on the killing of the dog and its burial: the closing sentences imply that you don't leave a badly wounded animal alive to suffer and that you bury a dead one with proper observances. The black child, on the other hand, gives no moral comment whatsoever. He concludes with the act that was for him the most dramatic, the shooting of the dog. His audience feels free to solicit from him the final fate of the dog, and the recording of the narratives shows many simultaneous voices doing so. The story of the "Dog and the Car," like that of "Hunting for Squirrel," shows something of the cooperation between audience and storyteller which characterizes storytelling by African-American children on the Waccamaw Neck. It is highly similar to the kind of repartee between audience and narrator described for storytelling among the Igbo peoples of Nigeria (Emenanjo 1977). Recent historical scholarship by Daniel Littlefield shows that more of the West African women brought to North America were probably Igbo than were of any other ethnic group (Littlefield 1981: 143). His study of the run-away slave records in South Carolina indicate that more women of that group ran away than women from any other, suggesting that the Igbo people were well represented in the early Waccamaw Neck slave population. Certainly many of the Igbos would have told and listened to stories in a way familiar to them in their homeland. That today's children should continue to conduct storytelling sessions in similar styles should not be surprising.

Beyond the storytelling style, probably a more striking contrast between stories told by black and white children is the language in which each is told. Both of the boys telling the dog stories above were poor students in school, both from

low-income families consisting of grandparents raising two children whose natural parents had died. The boys grew up in coastal South Carolina and were students in the same fifth-grade classroom. The white child's grammar is that of standard English in this story, while the black child's retains features of the creole Gullah spoken by early slaves in the region. African retentions in its lexicon have been described by Lorenzo Dow Turner (1949), who knew several West African languages. Its basic syntax has been analyzed by Cunningham (1970), and variations in its syntax by Nichols (1976) and Jackson (1978). I have elsewhere described the relationship I believe to exist between the creole Gullah and other varieties of English spoken by many blacks in the United States (Nichols 1981).

Important features of the grammar of this creole can be found in the stories of the black children quoted here. A list of some of them follows, with line references to individual stories. Not all of them are exclusive to Gullah, but all are characteristic of this English creole.

Pleonastic pronoun, following a proper or common noun

HAG Line 3

BORN WITH A CAUL Line 11

HUNTING FOR SQUIRREL Line 4

DOG AND CAR Lines 2, 4

Unmarked tense for action verbs

HAG Lines 3, 5, 7, 10, 11

PLAT-EYE Lines 4, 5, 8, 9

BORN WITH A CAUL Lines 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15

HUNTING FOR SQUIRREL Lines 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21

DOG AND CAR Lines 3, 4

Marked Aspect, for on-going or completed action

HAG Lines 1, 2, 3, 6

PLAT-EYE Line 6

HUNTING FOR SQUIRREL Line 3

DOG AND CAR Lines 2, 4

Unmarked Gender and Reduced Case Marking for pronouns

HAG Line 7

BORN WITH A CAUL Lines 2, 5, 6, 10, 13, 14

HUNTING FOR SQUIRREL Lines 7, 14, 16, 19, 21

DOG AND CAR Line 6

Complementizer "fuh" before infinitives

HAG Line 4

Unmarked Possessives for nouns

DOG AND CAR Lines 3, 4

"Dem" as Plural Marker for nouns

HAG Line 11

PLAT-EYE Line 2

In both linguistics and in folklore there exist long-standing controversies about origins of the language and the folklore of African-Americans. Raven I. McDavid, Jr., a dialectologist who has done the majority of the interviews for the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States (LAMSAS), maintains that any feature found in black speech is also found in that by whites of similar socio-economic status and regional background. While acknowledging the African survivals found by Turner in Gullah, McDavid and McDavid in a widely reprinted

article maintain that distinctive features of black speech in other parts of the United States result from long isolation in the plantation belt of the South and later in the ghettos of northern cities (McDavid and McDavid 1951). In this article and others, McDavid locates most of those differences in earlier dialects of English spoken in areas of early settlement in the South. William A. Stewart, with a background in creole and West African languages, maintains that a creole predecessor underlies present structural differnces between the dialect spoken by many African-Americans and that of standard English (Stewart 1968). Elizabeth Closs Traugott, who has done work both in the history of English and in creole languages, summarizes both these positions on the origins of Black English Vernacular and evaluates their claims (Traugott 1976).

The folklorist Richard M. Dorson has maintained a position similar to that of McDavid in linguistics on the origins of the black folklore he has collected throughout the United States. Dorson's position can be summarized as follows: "In the end the question becomes one of degree. . . .the African component for folk narrative in the mainland United States is too diminished to warrent much affirmation" (Dorson 1975: 164). For Dorson, the ghost, witch and devil in the black folktales collected by him are "standard English transplants" (Dorson 1977: 90). Daniel J. Crowley summarizes the argument between the "African Folklorists" and the "European Diffusionists" in his introduction to a collection of articles by the Africanists and a rebuttal by Dorson (Crowley 1977). The rebuttal by Dorson is of special interest because, while maintaining the European basis for black folklore in the U.S., he points to a sharp division between the lore collected from African-Americans in the Caribbean and in the continental United States.

The existence of such a difference in folklore is of interest here because of the similar regional split in the development of Atlantic Creole languages which

has been suggested recently by the linguist Ian Hancock (1980). He suggests that Gullah originated as an English creole spoken on the Guinea Coast and formed the basis of the variety which developed in South Carolina. He, unlike Stewart, does not see continuity between the creole varieties of English which developed in the Caribbean and on the coast of Carolina and Georgia. In my analysis of Gullah syntax, I have also found important internal differences between Gullah and Caribbean creoles (Nichols, forthcoming). Work by the historian Daniel Littlefield and others has begun to shed light on the question of why these differences in language and in folklore might have developed (Littlefield 1981). By analyzing journals, letters, and other records from plantation owners and by carefully collecting evidence available from run-away slave records, Littlefield has begun to document more precisely the specific regions of West Africa which were the homelands of much of the African-American population of South Carolina. The accumulating evidence suggests that these regions were sharply different from those of African-Americans in the Caribbean. There was some overlap, especially since the initial permanent settlement of Charleston was made by whites and blacks from Barbados. The bulk of the slave population in South Carolina, however, came directly from West Africa; we are beginning to learn precisely which parts.

Coastal South Carolina offers much potential for the understanding of ethnic traditions and acculturation to a new environment. Particularly in Georgetown County, where the African-American population came early and stayed late, there is a rich store of culture with ties to ancestral homelands and reinterpretations of old traditions to fit changing circumstances.

In both theme and storytelling style these stories by African-American children seem to be preserving and carrying on important cultural traditions. The children are reared often by grandparents or great-grandparents, while their

parents are working either on the Waccamaw Neck itself or in cities farther to the north. These children are never excluded from any gathering, from Saturday socializing in the many "clubs" which dot the Neck to Sunday preaching in the several important churches. In homes older children frequently sit quietly as the adults talk on a variety of topics, in sharp contrast to children reared in an Anglo tradition. The child-rearing practices and the long-established black population in this area of original African-American settlement contribute to the maintenance of these traditions through storytelling. The study of the lore and language of children in these communities provides rich sources of data on African-American traditions which have endured into the present.

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